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Environmental Quality Council
STATE OF MONTANA
EQ NEWS

Box 215, Capitol Station, Helena, MT 59601

Vol. 2, No. 6
Senator Elmer Flynn, Chairman

December 16, 1974
John W. Reuss, Executive Director

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EQC ADVANCES ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS PROPOSAL

Montanans and their government would benefit from a computerized environmental early warning system under a two-year, $130,000 program approved by the Environmental Quality Council (EQC) this month.

Proposed as the central objective of the EQC's 1975-'77 program plan, the Environmental Indicators Project was endorsed by the council in a Helena meeting as it approved solicitation for nearly $60,000 in supplementary matching grants from federal and private sources.

Loren L. Bahls, EQC staff ecologist and coordinator of the fledgling project now in its second month of preliminary work, said the EQC is ideally suited by legal mandate to evaluate the government's environmental programs and to monitor environmental quality.

Under the Montana Environmental Policy Act, it is the EQC's duty to "gather timely and authoritative information concerning the conditions and trends in the quality of the environment," and to act as the legislature's environmental auditor and adviser.

In addition to its annual reports, the EQC has been involved in major policy studies on land use and energy and has produced several special studies on topics ranging from subdivisions to saline seep.

The Environmental Indicators Project, Bahls said, is a logical extension of early indicators work detailed in the EQC's First Annual Report in 1972 and would satisfy a pressing need for meaningful environmental information in a time of rapid land subdivision and resource development.

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"Indicators provide a kind of environmental early warning system, a crucial aid in a rapidly changing world," Bahls said in a prospectus to the council.

The EQC proposal would marshal information gathered by diverse federal, state and private agencies statewide as it reflects on the quality of life and the state's environment.

Summarized in so-called indicators, the information becomes useful to citizens and the government in measuring the changes wrought by environmental impacts, gauging the effectiveness of state environmental programs and guiding the direction of environmental policy.

"Many people stand to benefit," Bahls said. "Actual or potential users (of the indicators system) include state and federal government agencies, the voting public, local government and planning officials, industry, the academic community, public interest groups, and the legislature."

Currently, much environmental information is lost in a never ending shuffle of obscure government reports, conflicting news stories, and academic complexity that simply overwhelm the average citizen and public officials too, Bahls said.

Indicators themselves--ranging from wildlife population counts to stream purity and flow measurements--can in turn be summarized into indexes, simple numbers pointing out the direction and severity of environmental change.

The indicators approach already is a part of the President's Council on Environmental Quality program and for years has been an annual project of the National Wildlife Federation.

One important practical reason for the collection of environmental indicators is to aid agencies that are assigned responsibility for pollution regulation.

For example, by recording small environmental changes such as damage to vegetation and materials, rates of respiratory disease and permanent changes in visibility patterns, the environmental indicators can provide proof of the need for or the effectiveness of state air pollution control programs.

The Environmental Indicators Project also would gauge the return on the taxpayer's dollar as it is split among a host of more or less coordinated regulatory and supervisory programs.

Among products of the two-year project will be a survey and published directory of monitoring activities of nearly three dozen government agencies, university units and private concerns actively collecting information in Montana.

If supplementary funding can be secured, the project also would survey public opinion on the factors important to the average Montanan's quality of life. Key to the project would be a central indexing and recording system to keep track of the hundreds of items of information.

Using monitoring results and the state's existing computer systems, the project would establish a permanent and automatic system to record environmental indicators for periodic public reports on the state of the environment.

COUNCIL ADOPTS HARLOW'S SALINE SEEP RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environmental Quality Council (EQC) has urged federal and state agencies and farmers statewide to adopt a detailed series of recommendations for the control of saline seep that were developed in a 10-week study this year by EQC intern Michael Harlow.

Harlow worked under the joint sponsorship of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and the EQC.

Harlow's 81-page report expanded early EQC studies of saline seep, a destructive deposition of salt on the land surface, and developed the first comprehensive description and analysis of the problem from an environmental perspective.

His Environmental Impacts of Saline Seep in Montana showed that saline seep already has affected an estimated 150,000 acres of cropland and could potentially affect a total of 17,000 square miles of land in the state.

Simply stated, saline seep is caused by excess soil moisture percolating through the soil, picking up dissolved salts, then resurfacing and depositing salt on the land and destroying the soil's ability to support plant life.

Harlow described the environmental impacts of saline seep control alternatives--intensive cropping, planting deep-rooted plants, returning the land to native grass, installing surface and subsurface drains--and concluded that control is possible but that technical problems, especially in agricultural economics, remain to be solved.

"Education of farmers, about the problem and the alternatives for controlling it, is sorely needed," Harlow said in his report.

But Harlow's key recommendation concerned the federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service: "This agency should revise their national policy, to make saline seep control measures eligible for cost-sharing programs on an equal basis with soil erosion control measures."

He recommended a centralized saline seep information clearinghouse within the Montana Department of State Lands; farm management seminars on saline seep; more university research and expanded surface and ground water quality monitoring by the state.

Also recommended were expanded programs of control and reclamation, including desalting tests on drain water; use of barriers and special planting techniques; return to natural grassland where possible and establishment of a saline seep land bank. The land bank would compensate farmers for loss of agricultural production due to control and reclamation techniques, and encourage cooperation among farmers who share the same saline seep problem area.

In response to the council's action, the EQC staff has begun an active program to distribute and encourage adoption of Harlow's recommendations among a host of federal, state, private and university agencies already involved in the saline seep problem.

Copies of Environmental Impacts of Saline Seep in Montana are available from the Montana State Library through local libraries across Montana. Additional copies can be obtained from the EQC on written request.

NEW ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENTS NOVEMBER 1-NOVEMBER 30, 1974

Date Received	STATE --- Subject	Originating Agency	
11- 6-74	Troutbeck Rise Subdivision. Proposed subdivision ½ mile W. of Lakeside. 63 acres divided into 79 lots varying in size from 20,000 sq. ft. to 51,600 sq. ft.	DHES	N
11- 8-74	Garrison-East. Project located near Garrison and extending easterly along U.S. #12 about 3.9 miles. Reconstruct existing deficient primary road.	DH	N
11- 8-74	Hoerner-Waldorf Pulp and Paper Mill at Missoula. H-W has applied for a permit to extend capacity of its mill from 1,150 tons per day of paper products to 1,850 tons per day.	DHES	F
11-12-74	Divide-West. First submitted 1-9-74, resubmitted for approval. Minor shoulder widening and installation of guardrail at intermittent points along 6 miles W. of Divide.	DH	N
11-13-74	Nayematsu Brothers, Inc. Feedlot. Request for a waste discharge permit. Operation encompasses approx. 3.5 acres and is located N. of Hardin in Big Horn County. Has a capacity for approx. 950 head of cattle.	DHES	N

New environmental impact statements (continued).

Date Received	STATE --- Subject	Originating Agency	
11-18-74	Manchester Livestock Market Center. Located at Manchester, 7 miles from Great Falls. Estimated 50,000 to 90,000 head of cattle to be sold at proposed market. Will comprise a yard and a sales arena for auction sales of cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses.	DL	D
11-27-74	Lolo Bikeway. Bituminous sidewalk and/or bikepath along the E. side of U.S. #93 in Lolo. To begin near school and extend S. approx. 2,300 feet.	DH	N

D - draft statement
EW - emergency waiver
F - final statement
N - negative declaration

DHES - Dept. of Health & Env. Sciences
DH - Department of Highways
DL - Department of Livestock

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